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UNCLAS COLOMBO 002138

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: MALDIVES: IBRAHIM ISMAIL ELECTED PRESIDENT OF  
OPPOSITION MDP IN FIRST EVER PARTY CONGRESS

REF: A. COLOMBO 2025

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 1953

[1](#)1. (U) The opposition Maldives Democratic Party (MDP) held its first ever party Congress in Male' December 19-21. On December 20, delegates at the Congress used a cascading preferential voting system to elect Member of Parliament (MP) Ibrahim Ismail party president and former SAARC secretary-general Ibrahim Hussein Zaki as vice president.

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Ismail, a long-time MDP activist, beat his closest competitor, former UNDP officer Dr. Waheed Hussein, by roughly 50 out of a total of 300 votes. The MDP had hired Elliott Roberts, a British consultant from the Electoral Reform Services, to oversee the election, which he described to the press as "very free and very fair."

[1](#)2. (U) Also at the Congress December 20, Mohamed Nasheed, currently under house arrest on terrorism charges (Ref B), was elected party chairperson by an overwhelming majority. That same day, the President's office granted Nasheed temporary respite from his house arrest to attend the Congress and address party members briefly. Police escorted him to and from the Congress venue. According to press contacts, Nasheed was permitted to attend the Congress December 21 as well, again with a police escort.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Ismail is a veteran MDP activist who has served time in prison (and in solitary confinement) for expressing anti-government views. (We visited him in detention on Dhoonidoo island in the fall of 2004.) Following civil unrest in Male' in August 2004, Ismail was one of four pro-reform Special Majlis (Constitutional Assembly) MPs detained and charged with sedition. In January of 2005, Ismail ran for the People's Majlis-- beginning his campaign while still under house arrest-- and beat thirteen other contenders to win the seat as an MP for Male'. Some MDP interlocutors have noted that Ismail has "autocratic tendencies," but he is widely perceived as committed to the reform cause and willing to work with other party members. Many in the party view Ismail's record of activism as providing "street credibility." In our conversations with him, we have found him to be personable, passionate about democratization, and pragmatic in his approach. He has mentioned working with Government of the Republic of Maldives (GORM) officials behind the scenes in order to assist his reform-minded constituents.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Comment: The MDP had been gearing up for this Congress for the past several months, with party leaders expressing optimism, tempered by worries of a possible GORM crack-down. The fact that the Congress has passed peacefully, with the GORM releasing Nasheed to attend, bodes well for future consultations between the government and the opposition. The government's Dhivehi Rai'yythunge Party (DRP, or Maldivian People's Party) is scheduled to hold its own party congress in January. The peaceful MDP party congress provides a good template-- and a tough act-- for its rival to follow. End comment.

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